**Reflections on Questions and Points raised at the Sunderland and East Durham Vicariate Meeting at St Robert’s School, Washington**

**20 October 2016**

**If the lay people in one parish want to talk to parishioners in another parish about getting emails of the parish reps or information about that parish, can they only do it through the priest?**

In many parts of the diocese parishes have begun to share the ‘Observations’ and the ‘Profile in Numbers’ documents with each other. They have found it extremely helpful in wondering what any future Partnership might look like. We can certainly make data available to other communities with permission. On a practical note we have been very careful about safeguarding parish information, so we cannot just give out email addresses of representatives. However, if you were to get in touch with us and say ‘I would really like to be in touch with these parishes’ then we will forward your email on to them and suggest to them that they might want to be in touch with you. We are more than happy to facilitate things in this way.

**Does the word Partnership refer to something specific, or is it a more general term being used to describe people coming together either formally or informally?**

At the moment the word is not prescribed, it is not clearly defined. The reason for that is because it is a new idea. Everyone is being invited to explore how communities might work more closely together and how new relationships can be developed. Once the Report has be offered to the Bishop and the Board (which is basically the Bishop, the Vicar General the Episcopal Vicars and four 4 people who advise the Bishop), we have committed ourselves to producing a practical guide as to what might be included in establishing a Partnership more firmly. We hope to make this more practical document available between January and March.

**In our discussion about Partnership the emphasis has been on church buildings and which parish can work with which parish. In this school where we are now, almost 80% of the pupils go nowhere near a church building. When we do come together in partnerships, will there be encouragement for lay people to look outwards and explore how they can engage with young people?**

The number of responses from young people in our Secondary schools varied from 4 to well over a thousand. The statistics quoted there come from a brief summary of the responses from each school which was made available to those schools where there was a sufficient response to make it possible. The more substantial document **The Way We See It** has prompted a number of conversations. Colleagues in the Education Department are looking at it with School Chaplains and the Heads of Religious Education. We have been with the Diocesan Youth Service and the Youth Ministry Team wondering about a major conference in May next year covering some of the questions raised in it. Almost every Parish Questionnaire Response made reference to the need to engage more fruitfully with young people. I wish I knew the answer to it. What may well be possible is that as we move from parish to partnership, as more people become aware of the key issues facing our Church in the future, there will a be wider range of people involved, a larger pool of people with the energy, interest and commitment to help us come closer to young people. What could well be possible is also the pooling of financial resources to help train leaders at a local level to encourage the whole worshipping community to be more open to engaging with young people.

The two things that come from the large report which young people say deepens their ‘faith experience’ are School Assemblies and Retreats. Perhaps we have to take these more seriously. The concern of our church communities in relation to young people will certainly be a significant item on our agenda, though I suspect that the answers lie at local level and in the relationships that can be made with people of all ages in our local communities.

**(From a young person) In your comments you talk about the Education Department and how it is working with the Heads of RE and the Chaplains. What if you’re not involved actively in RE or the Chaplaincy? How can the Education Department become engaged in outreach towards all the young people across the life of the school? In other areas it would be called ‘interleague learning’ – is this possible in relation to faith throughout the whole curriculum?**

What would be very helpful is if you could write to me and express what you are asking so that I can pass it on to the Education Department for them to look at more carefully. I think it would be something they would like to hear – and if you can get some of your friends to sign it with you that would be better! Thank you.

**Is there any lateral thinking going on in relationship to the Multi Academy Trust debate just beginning in the Diocese?**

There will be a number of people in the audience tonight who are very much aware of the debate that has begun in the diocese about Multi Academy Trusts, how many there will be and who will be included in them. We certainly have had conversations with the Director of Education about Multi Academy Trusts and in particular the use of the word ‘Partnership’. We are both using the word in similar ways. We have both looked at documents produced by the Secretary of State for Education and others and have discovered that we are using language in a similar way. Hypothetical questions come to mind which may need to be explored in the future – children in a partnership going to different schools, partnerships straddling different local authorities and so on. These may need to be faced in the future. But as far as conversations with the Department of Education are concerned, then they are taking place. It may not be lateral thinking, but it is happening.

**What is the timescale for Partnerships to be in place?**

The timescale we do know is that at midday on 27 November, all Proposals will arrive at our office! Then we will look carefully at what is being proposed, check out any details that need to be further explored, look at a wider range of questions regarding a proposed Partnership such as demography, finance, geography and so on and then make everything ready for the Board meeting in January.

To be honest, the rest of the timescale will depend on the results of decisions made at that meeting. It may be that there needs to be some further exploration in some areas, but once the bishop says ‘This is the Flexible Plan’ then we begin to explore how to put it into practice. It is flexible because there may be some parish communities which find it difficult to move on. They won’t be excluded, but it may be it is difficult for them to move on at the present time. Our diocese is starting something here that could well go on for ever, but once the Bishop says that he is satisfied with the Flexible Plan, then we can begin to look at ways to make it a practical reality on the ground.

**(A young peson). Is there a particular number of parishes that will make up a partnership, it seems that numbers like 5-8 have been mentioned at different times.**

We have never said anything very specific about this, because it really does depend on what is viable in a local area. What wouldn’t work is for a small number of priests or parish communities to simply offer an arrangement that is comfortable for them over the short term. It is possible for a partnership to be too small, if there aren’t enough people to guarantee future minsters, musicians, parish visitors, worshippers and so on. It could be too big if there was no chance of good relationships being built up over time. So for this reason we imagine that 5 or 6 might makes sense, with around 30 in the diocese – but we genuinely don’t know. What is needed is the possibility of a sense of coherence emerging over time.

We need to keep in mind that in 5 years’ time in whatever area we live in there will be at least 1 priest fewer than there is now, and in 10 years’ time there will be 2 fewer. We have 3 seminarians in training for the priesthood at the present moment and by Christmas we will have 20 priests under the age of 50.

We can’t simply be down hearted because of the fact that there will be fewer priests. We have among us the energy and imagination to seriously affirm lay leadership.

We need an arrangement that will ensure that there is some stability over the next 10 – 15 years.

**The Ten Headings provided by the Forward Together in Hope process have been extremely helpful and may be very useful in 5-6 years’ time for a Partnership to review its progress.**

People here who are familiar with the Young Christian Workers approach to living our faith might recognise that we have adopted a similar approach: looking at the church we’re in and getting a realistic picture of what it is like; making some judgement on how we are able to witness to the Lord in the future; putting decisions into action which enable us to take account of the mission of the church given our changing circumstances. It may well be good for us to appreciate the rhythm of this and be prepared to look at the headings some years ahead.

**Is may be important to share quantitative information across parishes because of the changes that have taken place over the years and we need to look carefully at the way our secondary schools have good relationships with people right across the diocese.**

If communities want to share their quantitative and qualitative information with others, then there is no problem at all, we would encourage this as much as possible.

There were very specific questions about the relationship between our worshipping communities and both junior and secondary schools in the diocese. It is interesting that there is a significant number of parishes which feel there is no relationship whatever between itself and the local secondary school. This will have been fed back to individual parishes via the **Observations** document which each parish received. There needs to be good relationships between the secondary school and the worshipping community. This gives rise to some of the really important questions for us to face in the future.

One final point is that if there are only 50 active priests in the diocese in 14 years’ time, it is very unlikely that there will be priests acting as School Governors. We will have to explore how the Church is soundly represented on the School Governing Bodies.

Jim O’Keefe